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ABSTRACT

This study sought to evaluate the impact of orientation, general levels of adjustment, differences between orientation attending and non-attending students, and differences between faculty and student academic performance evaluations for freshmen at Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania during the crucial first six weeks on campus. From a pool of 1400, 128 freshmen were randomly selected to complete a self-survey modeled from the Student Needs at Penn Sate, Millersville Assessment Program, and Student Attendance, Performance and Adjustment (SAPA) surveys. SAPA was also administered to faculty. Data were evaluated using T-test, correlation and frequency distributions. A majority of students (more than 70%) believed that orientation prepared them for most challenges except registration for classes and meeting faculty. Among respondents, 29% disagreed with the statement that "I rarely am homesick", indicating that homesickness is common. In fact, 9% said that they were considering leaving school. No significant differences were found in the adjustment of orientation attenders and non-attenders. The SAPA survey of faculty revealed large discrepancies between student self-assessment and faculty assessment. For example, only 28% of students identified by professors as having poor study habits said their study habits were not at college level. Included are 7 references. (DB)

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New Student Supports, Problems and Perceptions in Initial Adjustment

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Abstract

One-Hundred and twenty-eight freshmen completed surveys designed to assess the impact of Orientation, general levels of adjustment, differences between Orientation attending and non attending students, and differences between faculty and student academic performance evaluations. Data was evaluated using T-test, correlation and frequency distributions. Notable results include a high rate of homesickness which is strongly correlated with thinking of leaving school and the inaccurate self assessment of academically faltering freshmen. Most students say Orientation experiences help ease six week adjustment even though statistical support is not conclusive.

The freshmen experience has been emphasized in research investigating development and retention of students in higher education. Typically, holistic development should occur in six domains; social, cultural, athletic, spiritual, physical, and academic as students progress through four years of higher education.(Brown) Although each individual will progress at their own rate, the first six weeks of campus life are crucial to student adjustment and retention. (Tinto, Daubman, Gardner)

Orientation is often the new student's first opportunity to begin to understand and acquire the knowledge necessary for successful integration into the university community. This study investigates four aspects of orientation and student adjustment. First, students evaluated new student Orientation after having experienced six weeks of campus life. In other words, students were given the opportunity to reflect on the usefulness of Orientation in their efforts to adjust to their new surroundings. Traditionally SRU Orientation is well received by participating students; would time and experience alter the evaluation of Orientation? Secondly, general levels of student adjustment in six domains of development after six weeks of campus life were assessed. Adjustment differences between students who attended orientation and those who did not attend were examined. Finally, professors' assessment of student adjustment is compared to the students' self-assessment.

METHOD

Freshmen were defined as new first time entering students at Slippery Rock University in the fall of 1990. International students were excluded due to a separate, specialized orientation available to those students.

One-hundred and twenty-eight students were randomly selected from a pool of 1400 freshmen. Student participants completed a self - survey modeled from SNAPS (Students Needs at Penn State), (Upcraft, Peterson, and Moore), MAP (Millersville Assessment Program), (Harris, Anttonen), snd SAPA (Student Attendance, Performance and Adjustment), (Watson, Baker). SAPA, a student assessment survey distributed to SRU faculty during the 6th week of class, has a ninety percent response rate, due in part, to strong administrative support for the program.

General trends of orientation and adjustment were reviewed using frequency distributions, means and standard deviations. Orientation attending and non-attending data were subject to an independent T-test, (SPSSX).

Results

Students responded to eight questions evaluating the value of the orientation experience in their first six weeks of campus living. A majority (% > 70) found orientation prepared them for finding classrooms and offices, meeting new friends, understanding penalties for alcohol and interacting with persons from different cultural values. Orientation was

least helpful in preparing students to feel more confident about registering for classes and meeting faculty (% < 50).

Since 29 percent of respondents disagreed with the statement that "I rarely am homesick", responses indicate that homesickness is a common malady. Nine percent of respondents said they were thinking about leaving school. Although homesickness may not be enough to result in every homesick individual leaving school, homesickness and thinking of leaving school are strongly correlated. (r,.70)

No significant differences were found in the adjustment of students that attended orientation and the adjustment of non-attending students.

SAPA allows professors to identify students that are not attending class regularly, are not completing assignments on time, are not earning at least a C, or have poor study habits. Seventy percent of the students identified by faculty as not attending class, said they did attend classes regularly. Seventy-one percent of students identified as not turning in assignments on time said they turned assignments in on time. Of students identified by faculty as not earning at least a "C", 31% agreed they were not earning at least a "C". The other 69% disagreed with their professor's assessment and report they are earning at least a "C". Twenty-eight percent of students identified by professors as having poor study habits said their study habits were not at

college level.

Discussion

Current higher education issues include multiculturalism, alcohol consumption, and retention. Orientation, in an effort to advance SRU's goals, provides an environment that allows students to explore multiculturalism and alcohol issues. A majority of freshmen credit orientation with educating them about the penalties of alcohol consumption and preparing them to interact with persons from other cultural backgrounds.

As efforts to retain students continue, the early identification of students at risk is desirable. Although various methods of identification are utilized, it seems that the simplest method might simply be to ask students. Nine percent of our participants were willing to reveal that they are thinking about leaving school.

Although students who attend orientation report that they found it helpful in numerous ways, we found no difference in adjustment between students who had attended orientation and students who did not attend orientation. There are several possible explanations for the lack of difference between groups. Obviously, we may say that Orientation is not an important criteria for adjustment, although in doing so we will be contradicting the many students who reported that orientation did ease their adjustment in various ways. It is also possible that

students who do not attend orientation are students who do not need orientation. These students may already have the self-confidence, good study habits and familiarity with the university system that enable success. Finally, self-report may not be sensitive enough to discover real differences.

This studies big surprise is the discrepancy between student self assessment and professor assessment. Although small sample sizes for some variables suggest that caution be used in interpretation, it appears that students do not accurately assess their academic progress. Only 31% of students earning less than a "C" were cognizant of the fact. Further research is required for a clear understanding of the discrepancies. Students reporting that they attend class when they do not, for example, may be denying the reality of their progress or they may simply be biasing responses as they deem appropriate.

In conclusion, new students tend to assess orientation positively when evaluating the role of orientation in their personal adjustment. Considerable homesickness effects approximately a third of SRU new students as they struggle to separate from home during the first six weeks of campus life. Unsuccessful resolution of homesickness can lead to departure from the university. Students were relatively straight forward in admitting they were thinking about leaving school. Students attendance, performance and adjustment self-evaluation sharply contrast with professors'

evaluations, creating speculation for causality and requiring further research for clarity.

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